

# Medieval Clay Tiles

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## Types of medieval tiles:

- Inlaid (also called encaustic)
- Mosaic (refers to plain/without surface decoration tiles, mostly square, sometimes in shapes that are laid out in patterns). In English tiling, decorated tiles were used together with mosaic tiles to give contrast. In Islamic tiles, the fancy Moorish interlace designs are mosaic tiles (albeit very complex shapes).
- Painted (especially Italian, Dutch, and Portuguese)
- Relief/counter-relief/line impressed/incised
  - Relief: when the decoration is up from the surface plane.
  - Counter-relief: when the decoration is below the surface plane, usually made with a stamp.
  - Line-impressed: shallow line decoration made with a stamp.
  - Incised: line design made with a sgraffito or other sharp marking tool.

## Items needed for tile making:

- Clay, red and white earthenware (low-fire), preferably with grog [organic material that helps the clay stay together better]
- Work boards
- Clay tools & brushes
- Drop cloths for floor
- Carved stamps
- Extra boards as "strikers"
- Mallet for striking (wood, rawhide, rubber)
- Ziploc baggies
- Scissors
- Cheese slicer/knife/putty knife/scraping tool
- Glaze

## Workflow (of the typical English medieval floor tile workshop):

- Dig clay in fall; let it sit out until spring (weathering washes out the icky bits). Turn over pile at least once.
- Bring clay into workshop; add sand and organic materials until proper consistency.
- Put clay in forms (frames) [for this class we're not using frames]
- Add decoration (stamping, incising, inlay, etc.) For inlay decoration:
  - Take clay in frame, place it on sanded table
  - Take stamp, place it on clay
  - Cover with another board (called a "striker") and pound until design is set
  - Fill inlay with slip
  - Let dry to leatherhard
  - Scrape to reveal design and produce smooth flat tile
- Let air dry (sometimes the back had "scoops" of clay removed to improve drying and adhesion with the mortar)
- Glaze (if required for design/function)
- Fire (this is a single fire process)

## Inlaid tile facts:

- Size: generally 10-15cm square (4-6 inches), tiles are very thick, generally 22mm (1 inch)
- Biggest period of inlaid tile work is England, 1200-1500.
- Tiles are generally red earthenware with white inlay design. Lead based glaze gives the white clay a yellowish cast and improves warm tone of the red clay. Sometimes additives such as copper filings are added to glaze which adds a green or black color.
- Lots of heraldic designs; also birds, animals, monsters and geometric/flower designs.
- Individual tile designs popular as well as 4 tile radial patterns, later period 16 tile patterns popular.

## **Bibliography:**

Eames, Elizabeth. Catalogue of medieval lead-glazed earthenware tiles in the department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum, vol. I & II. London: British Museum Publications, 1980.

Eames, Elizabeth S. English medieval tiles. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Eames, Elizabeth. English tilers (Medieval Craftsmen series). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Grafton, Carol Belanger. Old English tile designs for artists and craftspeople. New York: Dover Publications, 1985.

Lemmen, Hans van. Tiles: 1,000 years of architectural decoration. New York: Harry Abrams Publishers, 1993.

Nichols, John Gough (ed.). Medieval tile designs Examples of decorative tiles, sometimes termed encaustic, engraved in facsimile, chiefly in their original size. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1998.

Weitzel, Tim [writing as Tryffin ap Myrddin]. "To Make Tiles, Bricks or Other Building Materials of Clay", <http://www.florilegium.org/files/CRAFTS/tiles-art.text>

Wight, Jane A. Mediaeval floor tiles : their design and distribution in Britain. London: John Baker, 1975.

## **Other books & Online places to visit:**

Chertsey Abbey: The New Tiles, <http://public.logica.com/~whiskerp/ca2.htm>  
New discovery of 13<sup>th</sup> c. floor tiles at Chertsey Abbey in 1996. Color pix.

Eames, Elizabeth. Irish Medieval Tiles. Royal Irish Academy, 1988

Emden, A.B. Medieval Decorated Tiles In Dorset. Phillimore & Co., Sussex, 1977.

Encaustic Tile, Christchurch Prior, Dorset, England, <http://resort-guide.co.uk/Christchurch-Priory/image-pages/newpage14.htm>

Yup, that's what it is. One color pix of a castle type inlaid/encaustic tile.

Healey, Hilary. Decorated Medieval Tiles in Lincolnshire, <http://www.cix.co.uk/~heritage/lincs/tiles/>

Medieval Gallery, WWW Tile Image Gallery, <http://www.derbycity.com/michael/medieval.html>

Medieval Tiles, <http://fp.stmarys.plus.com/pages/medeveltiles.htm>

Color pix of extant tiles found at St Mary's Priory Church, Monmouth, England. From the site:

"Those tiles that survive from the monastic church are now located in frames on the wall at the back of the church. The majority of the tiles are 15<sup>th</sup> century with some from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The tiles were made by Malvern tilers in a kiln, the first of its kind in Wales, recently discovered in Monk Street - Monmouth. Similar patterns are to be found in the Benedictine Tintern Abbey - a world famous ruin in the Wye Valley, and at Clarendon Palace."

Museum of Medieval & Encaustic Tile, <http://www.historictile.com/msmpg.html>